

Israel National Symbols: The Israeli Flag

At the ceremony for the [Declaration of the Establishment](#) of the State of Israel, the dais was decorated with a picture of [Theodor Herzl](#), flanked on either side by the flag of the [World Zionist Organization](#) (WZO). This flag, adopted by the first [Zionist Congress](#) in Basle in 1897, had become accepted by Jewish communities throughout the world as the emblem of [Zionism](#) and it was thus natural to use it at the official proclamation of statehood.

Five-and-half months earlier - on November 29, 1947 - when the Jews of Israel had poured into the streets to celebrate the United Nations [partition](#) resolution, they too had hoisted the flag of the WZO and used it as a unifying symbol. In May 1948, however, only a few days after the Zionist dream had become reality, the question was raised as to whether the Zionist banner should be the flag of the state or should be replaced.

The dilemma continued for about six months, until the following notice was published in the Official Gazette:

The Provisional Council of State Proclamation of the Flag of the State of Israel

The Provisional Council of State hereby proclaims that the flag of the State of Israel shall be as illustrated and described below: The flag is 220 cm. long and 160 cm. wide. The background is white and on it are two stripes of dark sky-blue, 25 cm. broad, over the whole length of the flag, at a distance of 15 cm. from the top and from the bottom of the flag. In the middle of the white background, between the two blue stripes and at equal distance from each stripe is a Star of David, composed of six dark sky-blue stripes, 5.5 cm. broad, which form two equilateral triangles, the bases of which are parallel to the two horizontal stripes.

25 Tishrei 5709 (28 October 1948)
Provisional Council of State
Joseph Sprinzak, Speaker



This decision to adopt the Zionist flag to be the flag of the State of Israel reflects its power as a symbol of the spirit of the Zionist movement. In order to examine the reasons that led to this decision, let us look for the symbolism and consider the motives which prompted the members of the Provisional Council of State first to consider replacing it and then to decide against doing so.

Zionist tradition credits the design of the Zionist flag to [David Wolffsohn](#). Legend even tells precisely when Wolffsohn had his brainstorm, namely, that during a meeting in Basel Herzl raised the question of the Zionist flag. When his proposal of a white banner with seven gold stars failed to marshal a consensus, Wolffsohn stood up and said: "Why do we have to search? Here is our national flag." Upon which he displayed his [prayer shawl](#) and showed everyone the national flag: a white field with blue stripes along the margin.

"At the behest of our leader Herzl, I came to Basle to make preparations for the Zionist Congress. Among many other problems that occupied me then was one which contained something of the essence of the Jewish problem. What flag would we hang in the Congress Hall? Then an idea struck me. We have a flag — and it is blue and white. The *talith* (prayer shawl) with which we wrap ourselves when we pray: that is our symbol. Let us take this Talith from its bag and unroll it before the eyes of Israel and the eyes of all nations. So I ordered a blue and white flag with the Shield of David painted upon it. That is how the national flag, that flew over Congress Hall, came into being."

— David Wolffsohn

In our attempt to uncover the message conveyed by the Zionist flag, we should therefore address each of its components separately — the [Magen David](#) ([Star of David](#)), the blue stripes and the white background.

The Star of David

Unlike the [menora](#) (candelabrum), the Lion of Judah, the [shofar](#) (ram's horn) and the [lulav](#) (palm frond), the [Star of David](#) was never a uniquely Jewish symbol. The standard name for the geometric shape is a hexagram or six-pointed star, composed of two interlocking equilateral triangles. In a classic article, Gershom Sholem shed light on the history of the "Star of David" and its connection with Judaism and tried to answer the question whether it was appropriate to include it in the national flag or state emblem.*

One of the first Jewish uses of the Star of David was as part of a colophon, the special emblem printed on the title page of a book. Sometimes the printer included his family name in the colophon; or chose an illustration that alluded to his name, ancestry, or the local prince, or a symbol of success and blessing. The idea was to differentiate this printer's books from those of his competitors and to embellish the title page. Colophons are as old as the printing press itself.

According to Sholem, the motive for the widespread use of the Star of David was a wish to imitate Christianity. During the Emancipation, Jews needed a symbol of Judaism parallel to the cross, the universal symbol of Christianity. In particular, they wanted something to adorn the walls of the modern Jewish house of worship that would be symbolic like the cross. This is why the Star of David became prominent in the nineteenth century and why it was later used on ritual objects and in synagogues and eventually reached Poland and Russia. The pursuit of imitation, in Sholem's opinion, led to the dissemination of an emblem that was not really Jewish and conveyed no Jewish message. In his opinion, it was also the reason why the Star of David satisfied Zionism: it was a symbol which had already attained wide circulation among the Jewish communities but at the same time evoked no clear-cut religious associations. The Star of David became the emblem of Zionist Jews everywhere. Non-Jews regarded it as representing not only the Zionist current in Judaism, but Jewry as a whole.

The Blue Stripes

The blue stripes on the Zionist flag were inspired by the stripes on the [talit](#) (prayer shawl). The talit has two separate symbolic aspects: the light blue hue and the stripes. Some say that the stripes are meant to recall the one dyed strand of the ritual fringes ([tzitzit](#)). This leads to the significance of the hue itself. According to the [Torah](#), one strand in the tzitzit should be light blue. To judge from references in the [Talmud](#), it was a shade between green and blue. Many symbolic meanings were attributed to it. Rabbi Meir said that it recalls the color of the sky; Rabbi Judah ben Illai maintained that the color of Aaron's staff was light blue, as were the Tablets of the Law, and this is why God commanded the Jews to include it on their prayer shawls: "As long as the people of Israel are looking at this tehelet, they are reminded of {the words} written on the tablets and observe them." In other words, the sight of the color tehelet leads to observance of the commandments. White and tehelet, along with gold and purple, were the colors of the High Priest's raiment ([Exodus 28: 4,43](#)) and of the curtains of the [Tabernacle](#) ([Exodus 26](#)). They were considered to be the colors of purity symbolizing the spirituality of the Jewish people.

The first person in modern times who voiced the idea that blue and white are the national colors of the Jewish people, was the Austrian Jewish poet Ludwig August Frankl (1810-1894). More than three decades before the First Zionist Congress, Frankl published a poem entitled "Judah's Colors":

When sublime feelings his heart fill,
He is mantled in the colors of his country
He stands in prayer, wrapped
In a sparkling robe of white.

- * The hems of the white robe
Are crowned with broad stripes of blue;
Like the robe of the High Priest,
Adorned with bands of blue threads.

These are the colors of the beloved country,
Blue and white are the borders of Judah;

White is the radiance of the priesthood,
And blue, the splendors of the firmament.

A. L. Frankl, "Juda's Farben," in *Ahnenbilder* (Leipzig, 1864), p. 127

Frankl's poem was translated into flowery Hebrew and appeared in the periodical *Hahavatzet* (The Rose of Sharon) in 1878. We do not know if the founders of Zionism knew the poem, but it is a fact that the flags of almost all the early Zionist associations borrowed the blue stripes of the *tallit*. A blue-and-white flag was raised over the agricultural village of Rishon LeZion in 1885 to celebrate the third anniversary of its founding. Independently of the Rishon LeZion event, a blue-and-white flag was raised in 1891 in Boston at the dedication of the meeting hall of the Bnai Zion Educational Society. That flag had blue stripes above and below a Star of David that had the Hebrew word "Maccabee" inscribed in its center. Bnai Zion first displayed their banner publicly in October 1892, during festivities to mark the fourth centenary of the discovery of America. This time the word "Zion" replaced "Maccabee."

Flag of the Bnai Zion Educational Society in Boston, 1892 The blue stripes of the Zionist flag serve as a counterweight to the message of the Star of David. They give the flag the religious and ritual aspect totally absent from the latter. Whether the symbolic meaning of the blue stripes was perceived consciously or not, their origin in the *tallit* reminds onlookers of the Torah commandments. The Zionist flag uses the Star of David to express Jewish unity, which is in turn guided by the precepts of the Torah, as represented by the blue stripes and white background.

Dual Loyalty

After nearly 50 years during which the flag served the Zionist movement worldwide, including the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community) in the Land of Israel, an ad-hoc committee of the Provisional Council of State in 1948 decided to "introduce a conspicuous difference - to the extent possible - between the flag of the State and the Zionist flag." Minister of Foreign Affairs *Moshe Shertok* (Sharett) explained that this was desirable "so as to avoid complications for Jewish communities when they raise the international flag of the Jewish people, namely the Zionist flag, and misunderstandings may occur, or the impression might be that they are flying the flag of a state of which they are not citizens." So that *Diaspora* Jewry would not be exposed to charges of dual loyalty, it was decided to organize a competition for new designs for the flag of the State of Israel, which would be different from the Zionist flag.

The proposal of Mr. Nissim Sabbah of *Tel Aviv*, included components that recurred in most of the proposed designs: two blue stripes, a white background, a Star of David in the middle and seven gold stars.

Another proposal endeavored to reconcile the traditional with the modern. It attempted to create a sophisticated symbolism based on the number seven. The seven candles of the Sabbath lamp are crowned by seven flames, shaped like Stars of David; thus *Shabat Shalom* ("Sabbath peace") is blended with the seven hours of daily labor proposed by Herzl. Another interesting detail is the shape of the proposed flag, which is reminiscent of the Star of David: jutting from the bottom is the lower half of the Star of David, while the same part of the star is cut out of the upper edge of the banner.

In July 1948, Mordechai Nimitza-bi, an expert on heraldry, published a book entitled *The Flag*, in which he sought to determine the appropriate design for the national flag. Nimitza-bi agreed with Sharett that the Zionist flag should be adopted by the State of Israel but also - that this was not possible.

"Even after the establishment of the State, many Jews will continue to live in the Diaspora, and were the Zionist flag to become the state flag, these Jews, who are nationals of their countries of residence, would be flying the flag of a foreign country," he wrote. Nimitza-bi was well versed in the rules of heraldry, especially of the British Empire. The flags of some members of the British Commonwealth incorporated the Union Jack either in the corner, or the center. In his various proposals for the Israeli flag, Nimitza-bi wished to impart to the State of Israel spiritual authority vis-à-vis the Zionist organizations worldwide, similar to the relationship between Great Britain and the dominions. He created many variations on the Zionist flag. The Provisional Council of State did not accept any of his proposals, nor those submitted by the public at large.

At the tenth meeting of the Provisional Council of State, Moshe Sharett submitted another proposal, that of graphic artist Oteh Walisch.

In Walisch's design, the flag is divided crosswise into three equal sections: blue stripes at top and bottom, with a single row of seven gold stars emblazoned on the white section in the middle. This division differs from that of the Zionist flag, which had five stripes - two blue and three white. The relative widths are different, too. Walisch's design represents a deliberate departure from the Zionist flag. As noted, the blue stripes on the latter were taken from the prayer shawl. When Walisch moved them to the upper and lower edges of the banner and made them wider, the design was no longer an obvious reminder of the *tallit*. The disappearance of the blue stripes gives his proposal a more "secular" character.

In the meantime, Moshe Sharett decided to inquire into Diaspora Jewry's thoughts about the flag of the State of Israel. On July 20, 1948, he sent cables to *Dr. Chaim Weizmann*, who was in Switzerland at the time; to *Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver*, in New York; to Prof. Zelig Brodetsky, in London; and to the Zionist General Council, in Johannesburg. Rabbi Silver replied that "we would prefer to leave the Zionist flag as the national flag of Israel, with a minimum of changes. We feel that the fear of complications as a result of use of the flag at Zionist gatherings overseas has been somewhat exaggerated." The other Zionist leaders responded similarly. After the fears of "dual loyalty" had been alleviated, the Provisional Council of State voted unanimously on October 28, 1948 to adopt the Zionist flag as that of the State of Israel. The resolution came into effect two weeks later, after publication in the Official Gazette.

The Tablets of the Law, the Lion of Judah, and Herzl's "Seven Stars," advanced as possible replacements for the Star of David during the discussions about the flag, were incorporated in other official emblems: the Lion of Judah is the emblem of the Municipality of Jerusalem; Herzl's seven stars are prominently featured in the emblems of *Tel Aviv* and *Herzliya*; and the Tablets of the Law appear on the emblem of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.

The Star of David is an outstanding example of the variable significance of symbols. The power of the message they convey stems less from the original use in history. At first the Star of David had no religious, political, or social connotations whatsoever. It gained a very powerful connotation precisely as a result of its terrible abuse by the *Nazis*.

The blue and white stripes which symbolize a life of purity, guided by the precepts of the Torah, and the Star of David, which symbolizes rebirth and new life for the Jewish people, tie the State of Israel, through its flag, to the past, present and future. This is evidently why the Zionist flag prevailed over the political considerations that had prompted the leaders of the new state to propose substitutes for it.

Sources: *Israeli Foreign Ministry*; The author is an art historian, art critic and a lecturer at the Open University of Israel.

*- G. Sholem, "The Curious History of the Six Pointed Star; How the 'Magen David' Became the Jewish Symbol," *Commentary*, 8 (1949) pp. 243-351.



Flag Proposed by Nissim Sabbah



Flag Proposed by Oteh Walisch